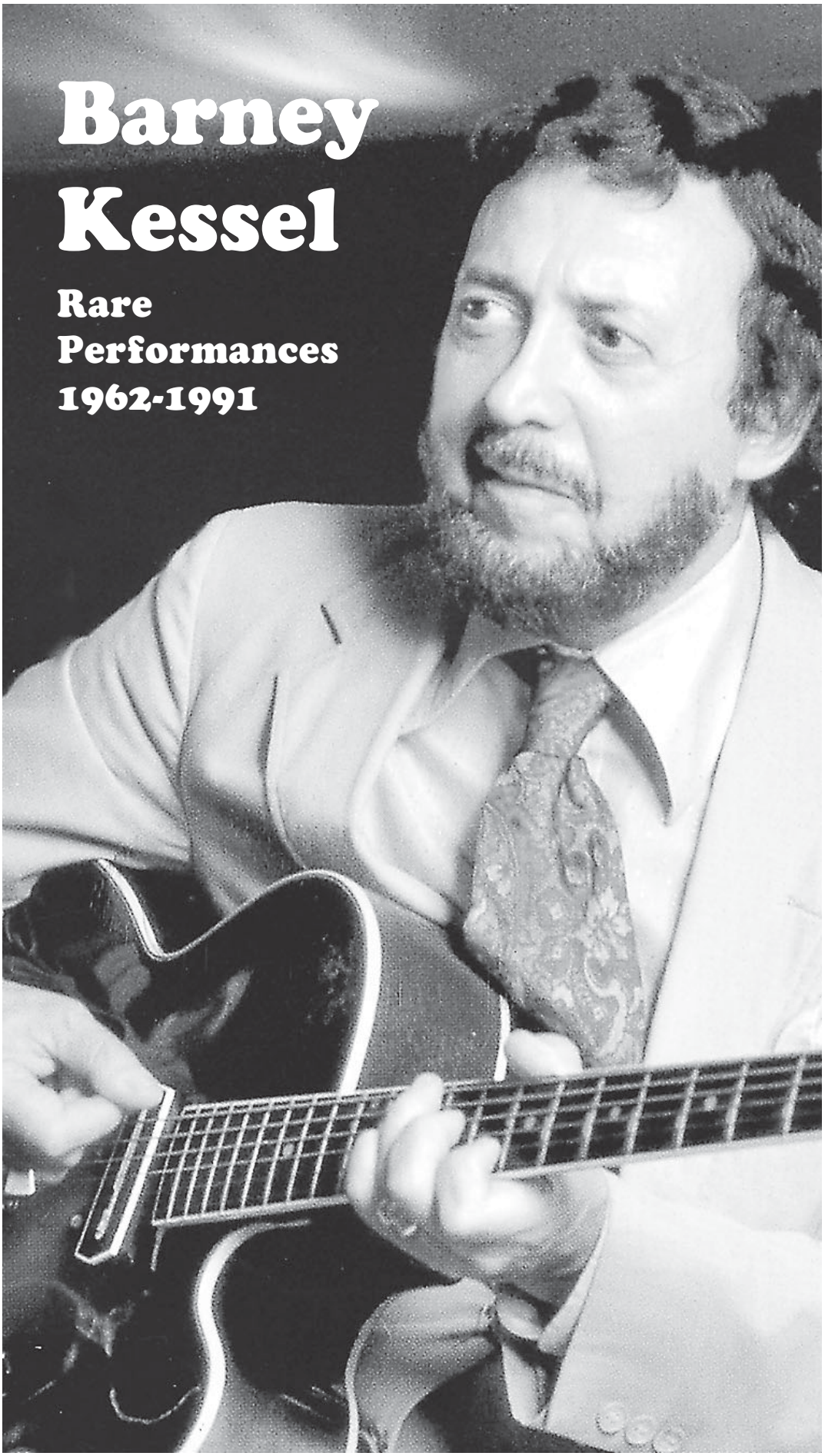

Barney
Kessel
Rare
Performances
1962-1991

Barney Kessel

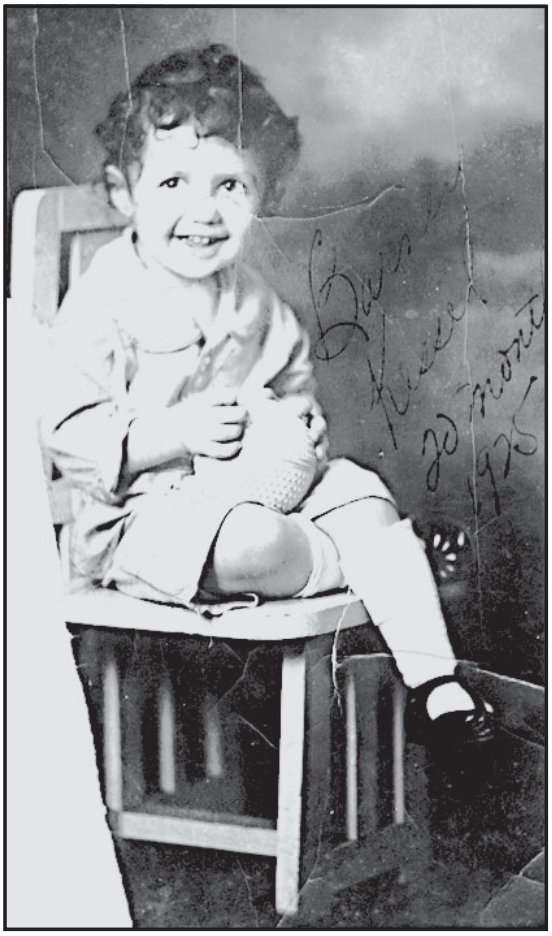
Rare Performances, 1962-1991

by Mark Humphrey

Photo courtesy of Barney Kessel

Careers often have a visible (or audible) arc. Our video retrospective of Barney Kessel catches his trajectory in mid-flight, twenty-some years into a career dedicated to jazz and the guitar. Kessel was a fully mature artist in 1962, but his continued growth is evident in performances from the ensuing decades. "Sometimes people forget that older musicians are still growing, still gaining more experience," Kessel observed in a 1972 Guitar Player interview. Kessel started gaining experience on October 17, 1923 in a town country star Merle Haggard memorialized as "a place where even squares can have a ball," Muskogee, Oklahoma. Stereotyped (thanks to Haggard) as a Podunk Paradise, Kessel remembers Muskogee as a town where "people didn't just talk about jazz, they lived it." Kessel points out that bandleader Jay McShann, in whose band Charlie Parker first distinguished himself, was also from Muskogee, where jazzmen and cowboys lived side by side.

Kessel was born in the swingin' Southwest just a year after Nick Lucas waxed the first recorded guitar solos, *Teasin' the Frets* and *Pickin' the Guitar.* The steel-string guitar was just beginning to find its voice in jazz when the 12-year-old Kessel started playing it. In his book, The Guitar (Windsor



Age 20 months, June 17, 1925

Music, San Diego, CA), Kessel writes: "In the southwestern part of the United States where I was born, the guitar was called a 'starvation box.' My earliest recollection of the guitar was hearing it played by tramps, hoboes, and wanderers. As I grew older, I became aware of the guitar being used by many amateur musicians as they played and sang western songs, such as *Red River Valley, Rye Whiskey,* and *Strawberry Roan.* There were many itinerant preachers who sang beautiful hymns, such as *I Walked in the Garden* and *Love Lifted Me.* From these simple experiences came my first desires to play the guitar."

Kessel was tutored in a Federal Music Project of the WPA; lessons went on four hours a day, six days a week, for three months. This intensive training gave him a critical nudge in the right direction, despite initial faltering. "I always felt like a real stumble-bum,"he admitted to Arnie Berle (Guitar Player, May 1982). "I remember when I learned to play the six-string barre F chord, my fingers bled from working so hard at it." His hard work was augmented by what Kessel believes was first-rate instruction in music theory as well as the mechanics of playing guitar. "I learned major, minor, chromatic, and augmented scales," he told Berle. "I learned how to read; I learned how to build up to four-note chords, and how to build diatonic scales. I also learned something that is a very important part of fingerboard study that I don't see being taught a lot today. My teacher insisted that as we learned to play each chord, we had to learn the name of each note in the chord, and we also had to know in which part of the

chord each note was. Like, which note was the 5th of the chord, or the 3rd. This all happened in just those three months in 1935."

Despite Kessel's belief that he was "in the bottom five" of his guitar class, his dedication to the instrument soon became cause for parental concern. The son of a bootmaker, Kessel's Jewish parents had come from Russia, where, he told Berle, "most musicians sold pencils at the subway station besides playing. So my parents had no way to relate to the fact that music could lead to anything of solid substance and success. My father broke my first guitar... He was concerned that I was spending too much time with it. He wanted me to do my schoolwork – have a profession and grow up and have a family."

But Kessel didn't let a broken guitar dissuade him: "I wanted to play everything I heard," he told Berle. "The music from the calliope at the fair, the tunes played by the organ grinder with his little monkey. I tried playing all those tunes on the guitar, and I would experiment on all the strings. In other words, the music was already in me. I wasn't looking for the guitar to tell me what I should look for. I already knew what I wanted to find, and I used the guitar to find it."

What he found increasingly drew Kessel to jazz. "At 14, I played with an all-black band," he told Norman Mongan (The History of the Guitar in Jazz, Oak Publications, New York, 1983). "I was the only white guy. They helped me to understand how to play jazz." Reflecting further on this in his "Guitar Journal" column (Guitar Player, November 1977), Kessel wrote: "This kind of musical climate [in Muskogee] and the easy acceptance of jazz really helped me, since it enabled me to become familiar with music by people such as Count Basie, even when I was only 14. I was actually playing it, not just in a school band, but with people older and more experienced than me. I was learning as an apprentice in real life, instead of just developing synthetically in a workshop."

Radio and records also brought jazz to Kessel, who cites Allan Reuss with the Benny Goodman Orchestra, Freddie Green with Count Basie, and Bus Etri with Charlie Barnet as among the guitarists whose work he studied while in his teens. "During the 1930s when guitar players took solos they seemed to divide up into two camps," Kessel recalled in his "Guitar Journal" (Guitar Player, March 1977). "They were either single-string players or chord players. Very few handled

"The Jade", Hollywood early 1940s

both to any extent, and when they did it was just a few little notes here and there from the side of the fence which they were not really on." About 1937, Kessel started hearing about a guitarist who would change all that: Charlie Christian.

"Almost all of the black musicians that I played with at that time (1937) had all known Charlie Christian and had already heard him," Kessel recalled in Ira Gitler's Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s (Oxford University Press, New York, 1985). This was two years prior to Christian joining Benny Goodman. "They were trying to tell me," Kessel recalled to Gitler, "'Play like a horn.' I didn't know that they meant to play a melodic, single-note line, to try and play like a tenor saxophone or a trumpet. I recall my very earliest, feeble attempts were to play either chords, like a ukulele, or to play single notes, but I would tremolo it as though it were a mandolin. They would say, no, play like a horn. I didn't know what they meant. Finally, when I did hear Charlie Christian it had an enormous impact on me... His style was very reminiscent of Lester Young to me. And then I could see what they were talking about."

Kessel got to see up close in 1940. "I was going to high school and playing with a college band from Stillwater, Oklahoma [Oklahoma State University] called the Varsitonians," he recounted in his "Guitar Journal" (Guitar Player, January 1977). The band was playing three nights a week at a club in Oklahoma City, where a black waiter took an interest in Kessel's playing and told him during an intermission: "I'm going to tell Charlie Christian about you. I think he'd like to know that there is a white boy around here playing jazz." Kessel took this announcement with a grain of salt: Wasn't Christian playing with Benny Goodman in New York City? "It was during the period when Benny Goodman broke his band up because Benny had a slipped disc," Kessel told Gitler. "During that time Charlie Christian went back to Oklahoma on a leave of absence..." And, true to his word, the waiter called Christian, who appeared at the Oklahoma Club within the hour. "So in the middle of the next set I was absolutely astounded and bowled over when I looked down and in front of my very own eyes there was Charlie Christian looking up at me, registering his approval of the music and what we were doing," Kessel recalled in his January 1977 Guitar Player column. The shock of seeing his idol grooving to his playing was comparable, Kessel notes, to "a twelve-year-old girl having the Beatles look at her during their heyday." Christian's presence was whispered across the bandstand, and soon the leader requested Christian sit in. Kessel was delighted to hand over his guitar to his idol, who, he recalls, "got up there and took some breathtaking solos."

Kessel's delight was compounded when Christian invited him out to eat after the show. Though only five years senior to the sixteen-year-old Kessel, his reputation was that of a master musician, and they weren't all so accessible to an eager kid. "I used to stop certain professional musicians," Kessel told Gitler, "and ask them questions. And almost all of them ignored me – they wouldn't give me the time of day..." Christian's kindness was a pleasant contrast, though the ugly reality of segregation made it difficult for the two guitarists to share a meal: "We finally settled on some restaurant where we had to eat in the kitchen," Kessel recalled. "That was the only way we could sit down and get served together."

Once there, Christian patiently endured Kessel's many questions. He also shocked his young admirer by suggesting

Paris 1953 with Django Reinhardt

they jam together the next afternoon. Kessel's delight at the invitation was tinged with anxiety: "When I begin improvising with Charlie Christian," Kessel asked himself, "what am I going to play?" Kessel realized that his enthusiasm for Christian's sound had made him something of a clone. Though the jam session went well, Kessel felt that playing next to the man he had come to closely mirror gave him the resolve to pursue his own musical identity: "I decided that no matter how much I liked Charlie Christian or anybody else, they would remain only influences," Kessel recalled in his "Guitar Journal" (Guitar Player, February 1977). "I began thinking in terms of absorbing these influences, rather than being absorbed by them."

Kessel's 'declaration of independence' spurred him to leave Oklahoma in 1941. "I started with traveling bands in North Dakota and Minnesota," he told Gitler. Kessel was furthering his self-education in any way he could: he remembers the happy accident of finding a book, Allan Reuss Guitar Solos, "while walking down the street in Minot, North Dakota, around 1941," he reported in his "Guitar Journal"

Hollywood 1952 with Oscar Peterson, Ray Brown recording with Fred Astaire

(Guitar Player, July 1977). "It was a on a window ledge under a potted plant, so I went up and bought it from the lady of the house. I've never seen another copy of that book, but I learned a lot from it..."

He knew enough by 1942 to figure he was ready to try his hand in California. Soon he was employed by Ben Pollack in the Chico Marx band (1942-43). Kessel fondly recalls that band, which toured nationally and offered him ample opportunity to sit in with other guitarists at informal jam sessions. "Wherever I played," he told Gitler, "I was like a gunfighter from out of town coming in, and they had their own local gunfighter, and he's pretty good, and we're very proud of him, let's see what you can do." While at Chicago's Black Hawk restaurant for a four month engagement, the Marx band was heard on live national radio broadcasts. "I had a lot of solos to play," Kessel recalled to Gitler. "I just sort of closed my eyes and played whatever came to me, freely, whatever it was." That spontaneity ended when one of the band members casually mentioned that millions were listening via ra-

dio! Kessel began memorizing his solos as insurance against making a mistake before such a vast audience. This careful approach soon took its toll on his improvisatory skills: "I hadn't been to a jam session in about two months," he recalled, "and I went to a jam session in Chicago... When I sat down to play, I realized that my reflexes weren't there, that if I thought of something it didn't come out right away; so something within me told me that I must get back to the way I was before and dare to make a mistake and dare to play freely, and that's the only way to get good at playing. The only way of getting good at making things up on the spot is to constantly make things up on the spot. That was an insight to me."

That insight led not only to freer playing but also to opportunities in increasingly prestigious company. Kessel's presence at Los Angeles area jam sessions ("I would go because there were no guitar players that were making the jam sessions") brought him to the attention of promoter/producer Norman Granz. It was at Granz's invitation that Kessel joined such veterans as Harry 'Sweets' Edison and Lester Young in the 1944 Academy Award winning documentary, Jammin' the Blues. Again segregation reared its ugly head: "Warner Brothers thought there would be a great problem in distributing the picture in the South," Kessel told Ira Gitler. Rather than risk showing an integrated band, the company had Kessel playing in the shadows, head down and 'blacked up': "They stained my hands with berry juice," he recalls.

Despite such indignities, Kessel was honored to play with tenor saxophonist Lester Young: "His music was the epitome of jazz's expression of its most meaningful aspects," Kessel wrote in his "Guitar Journal" (Guitar Player, January 1979), "and he played with more qualitative content than any other person I have heard." But it was the arrival of a new horn in town, that of Charlie Parker, that spun Kessel's head completely around. "Charlie Parker came out to Los Angeles late in 1945 as part of the Dizzy Gillespie Quintet," Kessel recalled in his "Guitar Journal" (Guitar Player, September 1978). Kessel caught up with Bird at an after-hours club, where the amiable Parker volunteered as 'roadie,' carrying Kessel's amplifier from his car to the bandstand and, in the wee hours, back to the car! "At that moment," Kessel recalled, "I was just a swing guitarist playing with the Bird and his bebop musicians." He believes Parker initially liked his playing more

than Kessel liked Parker's ("I was very slow on the uptake"). But after further opportunities to jam with Parker, Dexter Gordon, Wardell Gray, and Teddy Edwards, the light slowly dawned on Kessel: "The more I thought about and played this music," he recalled in his "Guitar Journal" (Guitar Player, September 1978), "the more I began to realize what I should play and what I should leave out in order to fit in with the other musicians and make a meaningful contribution."

But the transition to bop wasn't easy. "I had to change my own playing," Kessel told Gitler. "I can't begin to tell you what a blow it was to my ego...to start revising my own way of playing, because I didn't like the way I played... I was almost like a babe in the woods, because I didn't have that kind of technique at the time." But he was a quick study and joined Parker on a legendary 1946 Dial Records session which yielded such classics as *Carvin' the Bird* and *Relaxin' At Camarillo.* Kessel's talents were increasingly in demand: Artie Shaw employed him in his big band and Gramercy Five in 1944; Kessel recalls making his first recording of note, *Jumpin' On The Merry Go Round,* with the Artie Shaw Orchestra for RCA. In 1945, Kessel went on to work in Charlie Barnet's band. He then joined Benny Goodman's in 1947 (and served a second stint with Goodman in 1958). He was becoming a mainstay of Hollywood recording studios, and still loved to jam 'after-hours' when his schedule permitted. "I love the life of playing music," Kessel told Gitler. "I love the gypsy effect."

Kessel enjoyed playing gypsy in the company of pianist Oscar Peterson and bassist Ray Brown in 1952. "I spent ten

Nov. 3, 1968 at Polydor Records, London

months with the trio," Kessel recalled. "I became known, but I also learned an awful lot." Guitarist Jimmy Stewart vividly recalls seeing this threesome at a Jazz At The Philharmonic concert. "Because of the drummerless format," Stewart wrote (Guitar Player, July 1976), "Barney was asked to do the impossible job of being the rhythmic 'glue' of the trio. After feeding chords to pianist Peterson, he was then asked to solo. The tune that sticks out in my mind is their arrangement of *Seven Come Eleven.* Barney's solo was absolutely magnificent. He played with the rhythmic magic and imagination characteristic of Christian's playing, and his notes and phrasing were similar to that of the finest alto saxophonist of that period, Charlie Parker."

Photo courtesy of Barney Kessel

After ten months, despite the creative climate Peterson's trio provided, personal concerns prevailed on Kessel to recommend Herb Ellis take his chair in the trio in 1953: "My wife, Gail, was ill," he recalls, "and I had to care for my two boys." That same year Kessel's first album as leader, 1953's Easy Like (Contemporary 3511), debuted to raves and effectively launched the 'frontman' career celebrated in this video. Kessel was fortunate to have established himself in Hollywood during the 1940s. Television brought further opportunities in the 1950s (he was music director and arranger for CBS' Bob Crosby Show). And, of course there were many recording dates with legendary vocalists, including Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughn, Fred Astaire and Julie London (Kessel's guitar was a prominent feature of her hit, *Cry Me a River*). Beginning in 1957, Kessel's five Poll Win-

ners albums with Ray Brown, bass, and Shelly Manne, drums, persuasively argued the guitar's improvisational equality with the piano in jazz trios. At the same time, Verve Records kept Kessel busy as Director of Artist and Repertoire, in which role he discovered Rick Nelson as a recording star and produced, arranged and conducted Nelson's 1957 recording debut, a hot cover of Fats Domino's *I'm Walkin'*.

By the time our video opens with a 1962 performance of the 1937 Jaffe-Boland tune, *Gypsy in My Soul,* Kessel had a tremendous background as accompanist, soloist, and improviser on which he could draw. "My style has evolved and developed quite naturally," he asserts. "Rather than think of style, I prefer to refer to a person's musical values. These values don't stay still but are transformed by the changes in the individual's life."

A strong sense of continuity within change flows through the performances here. We witness the enduring impact of Charlie Christian in the superb *Seven Come Eleven* duet with fellow Christian disciple Herb Ellis. Charlie Parker's legacy is manifest in *Moose the Mooche,* a Parker composition. There are standards of the 1930s *(I Can't Get Started)* juxtaposed with those of the 1970s *(You Are the Sunshine of My Life).* Samba *(Brazilian Beat)* and calypso *(Kingston Kuties)* rhythms take a bow alongside ballads and boppers. Kessel shows he has a broad palette and a sure eye for combining its varied colors. "Self-expression," he has said, "doesn't mean collecting a bunch of licks from other people and wearing them like a necklace. You've got to be yourself If you don't believe what you're playing, your audience will not feel anything."

That's never been a problem when Barney Kessel plays. "He retained the drive and attack of the Christian approach without sacrificing the wider harmonic possibilities offered by bop," writes Norman Mongan (The History of the Guitar in Jazz). "His personal mannerisms – the upward (or backward) rake across the strings, the extroverted use of blue notes, smears, chordal solos – make his approach immediately recognizable."

Kessel's signature sound has earned him countless accolades and magazine poll awards (1947's Silver Award from Esquire was the first). His outspoken advocacy of maintaining musical standards was a recurring theme of his long-running Guitar Player columns. So, too, was a 'know thyself attitude towards musical growth: "The only way to get good

at improvising," Kessel once said, "is to improvise on what's in you... Of all the ways to improvise, the most stimulating and demanding is jazz, because it...asks you to thoroughly know both your instrument and the principles of music so well that they are reduced to subconscious habits..." And beyond the careful preparation, Kessel said in a guitarists' roundtable with Herb Ellis, Joe Pass, and Howard Roberts, there are the intangible qualities of inspiration and creative spontaneity: "We don't have these all the time," he said. "I may play three sets in a club and on just one tune I've got it. This is the magic of our kind of music..." And that magic is the essence of who Barney Kessel is. "There's no music in the guitar," he once remarked. "It's the human being who makes the music."

Photo by William Gullette

Track Listing

England 1987

1. Interview

Jazz Scene USA 1962

2. Gypsy In My Soul

Composer: Clay Roland Lyrics: Clay Boland & Moe Jaffe

3. One Mint Julep

Composer & Lyrics: Rudolph Toombs

Bass: Buddy Woodson • Drums: Stan Levey

Sweden 1967

(Newport Jazz Festival)

4. On A Clear Day

Composer: Burton Lane Lyrics: Alan Jay Lerner

Bass: Sture Nordin • Drums: Pele Hulten

Sweden 1973

5. I Love You

Composer & Lyrics: Cole Porter

6. Brazilian Beat

Composer: Barney Kessel

Bass: Sture Nordin • Drums: Pele Hulten

England 1974

7. Here's That Rainy Day

Composer: Jimmy Van Heusen Lyrics: Johnny Burke

Switzerland 1979

8. Moose The Mooche

Composer: Charlie Parker

9. I Can't Get Started

Composer: Vernon Duke Lyrics: Ira Gershwin

10. You Are The Sunshine Of My Life

Composer & Lyrics: Stevie Wonder

Bass: Jim Richardson • Drums: Tony Mann

Iowa 1979

(Great Guitars/Maintenance Shop Jazz)

11. Undecided

Composer: Charles Shavers Lyrics: Sid Robin

12. Kingston Kuties

Composer: Barney Kessel

13. Seven Come Eleven

Composers: Benny Goodman & Charlie Christian

Guitar: Herb Ellis • Guitar: Charlie Byrd
Bass: Joe Byrd • Drums: Wayne Phillips

Oklahoma Jazz Hall Of Fame, Tulsa 1991

14. Speech

Special thanks to Robert Yelin, Maurice Summerfield and Phyllis and Barney Kessel for making this project possible.

"I'm not playing what you might call traditional music nor am I playing 'space' music. I'm not trying to cling to the good old days, nor am I angry at anyone. My music expresses my true inner feelings; that is, someone who has kept aware in the midst of so many stirring influences." – Barney Kessel

Barney Kessel is a legend in the history of jazz, one of the most original voices in guitar playing to have ever recorded. Leonard Feather called him "as lyrical a guitarist as we have in jazz...a rhythmical natural who can out swing any man in the house." Nat Hentoff said simply, "he's one of the most extraordinary consistent and emotionally huge improvisers of our era."

This video captures almost 30 years of rare performances from 1962 to 1991. Barney is seen playing in a trio setting, solo and with his friends, jazz guitarists Herb Ellis and Charlie Byrd. All the performances capture the unique artistry of this great American musician. Andre Previn summed it up best: "Barney has a staggering amount of technique, a healthy respect for the traditional, a ceaseless curiosity for the experimental and an admirable and lovely harmonic sense."

Tunes include: Gypsy In My Soul, One Mint Julep, On A Clear Day, I Love You, Brazilian Beat, Here's That Rainy Day, Moose The Mooch, Medley: I Can't Get Started/Sunshine Of My Life, Undecided, Kingston Kuties and Seven Come Eleven.

Running time: 60 minutes • B/W and Color
Front photo by Maurice Summerfield
Back photo by Tom Copi
Nationally distributed by Rounder Records,
One Camp Street, Cambridge, MA 02140
Representation to Music Stores by
Mel Bay Publications

A division of
Stefan Grossman's Guitar Workshop, Inc.

VESTAPOL 13013

ISBN: 1-57940-960-1

0 11671 30139 6

ROUNDER